

Listen to the River

Karl Orend

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Glimpses of an unknown Louis Stettner



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This chapbook is dedicated to Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno.

“For myself, photography, sculpture and painting are inseparable – and all play an essential role in my vision of life.”

Louis Stettner

Louis Stettner is a major artist hiding in plain sight. Obituaries in America defined (and dismissed) him as a Humanist photographer. In Paris it was different. Appointed as a *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres* by the French and awarded the *Orden al Mérito Docente y Cultural Gabriela Mistral* by Chile, Stettner has been recognized internationally as a multidimensional creative figure. He left behind nearly a thousand paintings, a hundred and fifty sculptures, hundreds of drawings, and a significant body of work in prose, as well as plays and poetry. Most of the photographs he took during nearly eighty years behind a camera are not exhibited. Nudes and still life were major subjects but are rarely seen. Nature was a constant theme in Stettner's photography. It has been ignored for decades, as were Atget's images of trees taken over a lifetime. Stettner's first known photograph was of a tree in his backyard when he was fourteen. His last, part of his culminating achievement in photography, was also of a tree, in Provence, aged 92.

Whole series of photographs that Louis Stettner considered important, major portfolios, collages, works in clay, and mixed media, where photographs were combined with art, await discovery. Part of Stettner's closeness to Brassai, whose “positive criticism and development were vital for my development as a photographer,” is explained by the fact that both felt compelled to express their creativity in numerous ways, and in diverse media. Brassai created everything from paintings to tapestries and sculptures and ballet sets. He was also a major writer in his chosen field – author of seminal studies of Picasso, Henry Miller, and Proust.

Louis Stettner studied with world-famous artist Ossip Zadkine in Paris in the late 1940s and described sculpture as his “second nature.” Only two significant exhibitions in France have ever shown his photos, paintings, and sculpture in unison, as he had wished. Combined, they form a major triptych that provides the only possibility of fully comprehending his artistic vision. Stettner often linked both his own work and Brassai’s to tapestry. Both shared a “lingering enjoyment over detail and texture,” so that “we can enjoy the texture of life.” Brassai’s influence remained with Stettner. He first got interested in the *Marché aux Puces* near Saint-Ouen by examining artefacts Brassai found there long before they met in 1947. From 1990 Stettner lived in Saint-Ouen, joined the local Communist Party, and became a celebrated member of the community. Here he created his *Marché aux Puces Series*. That Stettner’s own comments about his work are usually ignored can be typified by considering his statement: “The Brooklyn Bridge was the greatest thing that ever happened to us.” He created a major portfolio on the Brooklyn Bridge that alludes to Walt Whitman, Federico Garcia Lorca, Henry Miller, and Hart Crane. Crane’s famous poem *The Bridge* had been published with photographs by Walker Evans. Like many of Stettner’s finest works, his Brooklyn Bridge series is neglected and invisible to the public, even in New York.

In the beginning was the Word. Louis Stettner was slow to speak. When stressed, he stammered all his life, but his first words had been: “there is the Sun.” He reminisced with Clément Chéroux about the experience:

“I would like to believe that I discovered my true *métier*, photography, right from the start, the mother lode, the source of all light.”

Stettner was talking with a photography curator, so he expressed the event in photographic terms. Yet photography was just one aspect of his lifelong creative engagement with diverse aspects of philosophy, literature, the arts, architecture, human life, and the natural world. As he often did, Stettner was elliptically alluding to the Bible:

“And God said: Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw the light and saw it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.”

This is just one of many instances where Stettner hints at a religious purpose in his life’s work. The photographer, Stettner once said, is “doing God’s work” from the very beginning. The complexity of his vision can only be revealed by exploring the intricate interplay of his various influences, and his constant exploration of contradictory ideas, in which seeming opposites can eventually be reconciled. Stettner felt no obligation to be consistent, following, as he did, the Transcendentalist touchstone that is an essential part of Walt Whitman and Emerson’s vision:

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistence a great soul has simply nothing to do.”

Through the influence of Moholy Nagy and Cartier Bresson, in the mid-1940s, a parallel to this religious vision gave him a breakthrough that resonated through his finest achievements in photography. Cartier-Bresson, a painter by inclination, learned from André Lhote that creatively: “In the beginning was the Word”: but “for me, in the beginning was ‘Geometry’.” Painting, Photography and Architecture are all connected through Geometry, and the study of form and content. The great photographer chooses instinctively when and where to divide the light from the darkness, and thus channels the divine. Like Cartier Bresson, Stettner became fascinated with the Golden Ratio, and studied this in architecture, photography, and painting. They both asserted that “within all this chaos, there is order.”

The first great photograph Louis Stettner saw in which form and content were unified was Stieglitz’s *The Steerage*. This had an important emotional resonance for him, given the immigrant Jewish community in which he was raised. He later individualized and modernized the experience in his

photo entitled *Coming to America*. Stettner believed Stieglitz, who opened a path for him, had dedicated his life to “the spiritual possibilities of photography.” Among Stettner’s most important intellectual and emotional touchstones were Elie Faure’s *Histoire d’art*, Henri Focillon’s *La vie des formes*, (and, for his sculpture, *Eloge à la main*) and Rudolf Arnheim’s *Art & Visual Perception*. Faure was a towering figure, who had a decisive impact on Henry Miller, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Cartier-Bresson, among many others. Brassai would have told Stettner that photography was the conscience of painting, reminding the artform of what it must not do, so that painting assumes its own responsibilities.

Louis Stettner was the last of four brothers. He shared the womb with Irving. They would be close until their relationship broke apart in Paris in the early 1950s. Louis experienced twinship as a trauma. Thus began a fascination with identity, struggle, his place in the world, and a need to assert the ego. Clément Chéroux has written insightfully about echoes of their twinship in photographs, in *Louis Stettner: Travelling Light*. I knew Irving well for nearly thirty years, and he never once mentioned Louis. This distancing was true of both brothers. Each left unspoken evidence of their troubled relationship in their creative lives. Louis always refused the term “identical twins,” opting instead for “mirror twins.” The contrast in their styles in the visual arts is striking, but they are complementary. The oldest Stettner brother, David, was a source of emotional and financial support to both over decades. The second brother, Max, left early for Hollywood, was successful in the film industry, and largely disappeared from his family’s life. Their father Morris, a hard-working man, of “reserved and gentle disposition,” was a cabinetmaker. It was Morris who bought Louis his first camera. He had been an amateur photographer but was forced to abandon it due to the responsibilities of running a business and supporting a large family. It was ten years after Morris’ death before Louis was told that his father had been proud of his accomplishments. Stettner wrote of his illiterate mother, Nettie: “Her love

intermingled with penetrating criticism and an unrelenting striving for perfection... gave me a remarkable insecurity.”

Penetrating criticism and perfectionism were traits which Louis resented, but later adopted. Stettner was sometimes unable to “see” the other, and to gauge what their needs and expectations were, or what their reactions would be to his criticism, or him prioritizing himself. Stettner described himself in print as “blunt” and remarked that “politeness doesn’t run in my family.” In the 1970’s he used his regular columns to either praise or sharply criticize other photographers. Stettner offended Edward Steichen during preparations for *The Family of Man* exhibition in the early 1950s. Steichen “angrily walked out, slamming the door behind him.” Stettner claimed that all he had said was that he didn’t understand something. Yet, Steichen had no grudge against Stettner. In fact, he had been part of a jury that awarded Louis a prize from *Life* magazine. This exhibition was said to show love for mankind, and faith in its destiny. Steichen was not only head of photography at MOMA, but a world-famous figure, who had co-edited *Camera Work*, which had been a major influence on Stettner. This exhibition was arguably the most important photography exhibition of the twentieth century. It was seen internationally by ten million people and has been exhibited in over 150 venues on five continents. 273 photographers were represented from 68 countries, including over 160 Americans, and several friends of Stettner from New York and Paris. Louis was missing. This event began a decades long acrimonious and aggressive relationship with curators in general, and MOMA, until the 1990s.

Stettner subsequently wrote:

“All the world’s great art...was produced without curators coming between the public and the artist. Now, having set themselves up as High Priests, the public not only has no say in the matter, but whatever reactions they may have to what is on the walls is completely ignored.

Except for a few curators, they have managed to convince the public of its fundamental ignorance; that only a highly developed specialist can pass on what is and is not real art.”

Stettner believed no curator could explain the slight but important differences between great artworks or great photographs, they could only explore their similarities.

In their youth Louis and Irving both chose a Brooklyn writer who would accompany them every day for the rest of their lives, provide a perfect companion, and a vision they sought to emulate. For Irving it was Henry Miller. For Louis it was Walt Whitman. In essence Miller and Whitman were one.¹ Miller was a major influence on both brothers. Brassai and Zadkine had been characters in *Tropic of Cancer*, and it was through an introduction from Miller that the twins met these legendary Parisian artists. Louis never spoke of his relationship with Miller and the influence of his books, mainly to distance himself from Irving who became close to Miller from 1947 until Miller’s death in 1980. Irving also studied drawing and painting with Zadkine. While Louis studied sculpture and film and took photographs, Irving got by as a sketch artist in cafés, handouts from family, friends, and patrons (including Alice B. Toklas), and odd jobs, such as painting Tristan Tzara’s apartment. He spent much time with Egyptian writer Albert Cossery, again met through Henry Miller. After demobilisation following World War Two, Irving had worked, in Mexico, for Michael Fraenkel, who had been a major influence on Miller, as well as his collaborator, and another character in *Tropic of Cancer*.²

Louis and Irving both kept Walt Whitman close all their lives, but they shaped their public statements in ways that hid or played down their mutual influences. The twins had been greatly impacted by their time at

Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn under Gabriel Richard Mason. Mason was a Jewish immigrant from Minsk, in Russia. Those of his family that did not come to America died in the Holocaust. Like Stettner, he was very proud of his Jewish heritage but gave up Temple after his bar mitzva. Mason came to “revere Karl Marx” who had “correctly diagnosed the evils of society and who offered an effective program to cure these ills.” Mason also founded The Emerson Society. He was steeped in Transcendentalism and Whitman. Mason carried Emerson’s *Essays* with him daily, as Stettner later did Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Mason also defended communists from persecution during 1920s witch-hunts that resembled those later enacted by Senator McCarthy. Irving Stettner, in his memoir *Thumbing Down to the Riviera*, revealed that it was at High School that the twins were exposed to and became passionate about Whitman, Transcendentalism, and Karl Marx. Henry Miller, they discovered through the Gotham Book Mart, where Frances Steloff sold them copies of *Camera Work*, and under-the-counter books from Paris, banned in America, such as *Tropic of Cancer* and *Black Spring*. Once Louis started taking photographs seriously, he read *U.S. Camera* magazine, where Paul Outerbridge Jr. planted a seed: “The great potential of photography for interpreting the world around you.” Louis wanted to attend a specialist school for the plastic arts when he left High School, but his father couldn’t afford the fees.

There was also part of Louis’ work, personality, and character he could not see. He dominated a room and could charm those who interviewed him. While dialectic fascinated him, and he thrived in his contradictions, there were subjects on which he could not be swayed, such as his faith in communism. Like a Talmudic scholar, he could study, debate and question endlessly, but his faith in the fundamentals of what he believed was absolute. He avoided discussion of the crimes of communist regimes, and never clarified his stance publicly. He was offered a major show in the German Democratic Republic, but it never happened, even though he had nothing but praise for what he had seen there. Although identifying

¹ Katy Masuga *Henry Miller & How He Got That Way* Edinburgh University Press 2011.

² Michael Fraenkel *The Genesis of Tropic of Cancer* Alyscamps Press 2019.

as a Jew and realizing that if his father had not left Europe he might have died in the Holocaust, he never made significant public statements on the subject; though once he moved to Saint-Ouen, he discussed the subject with close friends. Several times over the decades Louis complained about having to hold down a job or work on assignments to get by financially. Yet, this was true of most photographers and writers. Brassai took hundreds of photographs for hairdressers and accepted many commissions for money. Henry Miller wrote for over thirty years before finding security. Stettner turned away from collaborations with writers that could have eased his situation, unlike Robert Capa, Tore Johnson, or Robert Frank. Those who loved Louis did so unconditionally. He lived in a constant present, with his eyes set firmly on the future, when the working class would take over, and artists get the support they merited.

Three major events had combined to set the direction of Louis' life around the age of thirteen. One was the discovery of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Transcendentalism, another was his first camera, and the third was a transformative experience on the beach at Coney Island after school, when he was looking up at the clouds. It was "a truly Cosmic experience."

"Somehow the ocean, the white sand...and the fleecy clouds began whirling together, mingling with the gusty aroma of sea spray and the plaintive shrieks of seagulls. I found myself travelling, moving in space in complete harmony with the movement of the world...For the first time in my life I was touching eternity, was pulsing along with the universe. I was not just admiring nature; I had become part of it."

This mystical, spiritual, event, combined with the "poetry of the streets," paralleled the Cosmic vision of the world found in Whitman, but also other seminal influences on Stettner, such as Elie Faure. The most important work Stettner created came from a place so deep within that he was unaware of it. Louis used "religion is the opium of the people" like a

mantra. Yet, his entire life and work are tied up with religious tradition and imagery – from his favourite books to the way he took photographs and made art, used symbolism from religious works to create, and embodied a spiritual message. In later life, he hoped that his achievement would stand out "like a spire" in the great cathedral that testified to the fusion of the human and divine. He described both a great photograph and a book of his photographs published as "a miracle." He also said: "I am only a vehicle to transmit the image." This parallels Henry Miller's religiosity and his description of "the Voice" behind his writing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had said:

"Make your own Bible. Select and collect all the words and sentences that in all your readings have been to you like the blast of a trumpet."

Louis Stettner did this in his creative work. He collected everything that had meaning to him and transposed it using the visual arts to create a unified corpus. In his photographs may be found allusions to works of art spanning centuries, including Rembrandt, Goya, and Gauguin. Stettner sometimes revealed their interconnectedness:

"My purpose is not to hide the rest of the human figure. On the contrary, I want to indelibly imprint it on the onlooker by forcing him to invoke his imagination. It is a device like the silhouette shadow used in art. What is hinted at carries active participation on the part of the onlooker, whom after all everything is directed at. A classic example of hinting rather than bathing everything under an all-revealing floodlight is Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*."

Sometimes, he could be profoundly influenced by an image he never captured on film, yet which remained in his mind forever. Sometimes, he had an image in his mind and had to wait decades to be able to have an opportunity to photograph it.

Stettner's photographs can only be fully understood by seeing them in the context of a detailed study of the impact of visual arts, architecture, nature, books, philosophy, politics, and his own writing. He saw photographers in contradictory terms: each had to assert their individual vision and contribution, yet ideally, they learned from their masters and worked together, like a guild of craftsmen from the Middle Ages building a cathedral, to bear witness for a future unified humanity.

"So, we work not only for each other, but for all those that come after us."

"These were our masters and fellow photographers for whom I have feelings of love, gratitude, and great solidarity. We were colleagues in the same *métier*; and I again return nostalgically to the Middle Ages, sorry that we did not belong to the same Guild, sworn to mutual help..."

Stettner was profoundly influenced by literature. The writers he listed as the most important in his life, such as Dostoevsky and Balzac, all had religious and philosophical underpinnings. Stettner's fascination with Ahab and Ishmael in *Moby Dick* comes from the interplay of Melville's rejection of Transcendentalism and explorations of non-conformity.

Walt Whitman was not only from Brooklyn, but obsessed with France, French language, photography, and the visual arts. He saw his poems in visual terms, and photographs and paintings as poems: *ut pictura poesis*.

"In these *Leaves* everything is literally photographed. Nothing is poeticized."

Louis Stettner was not alone. *Leaves of Grass* had an enormous impact on writers, artists and photographers in the generations that succeeded its publication. When Henry Miller crossed America on his *Air-Conditioned Nightmare* trip, he made notes for his book in a dummy of *Leaves of Grass*. Edward Weston took hundreds of photos to illustrate *Leaves of Grass*. Minor White took over six thousand photos inspired by Whitman. In linking himself to Whitman, Stettner was part of a major trend in

photography. Susan Sontag identified the Whitmanesque lineage in photography as being "propagandized by Stieglitz." Walker Evans, she considered: "the last great photographer to work seriously and assuredly in the mood deriving from Whitman's euphoric Humanism." What Sontag called "Whitmanesque influence", Stettner called "Humanist Realism". Walker Evans distanced himself from this trend in his subway series *Many Are Called*, and the Agee collaboration, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Sontag saw the death knell of the Whitmanesque message of the unity of Mankind in Steichen's propagandist *The Family of Man* exhibit of 1955, which was heavily criticized by Roland Barthes.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* did not contain Whitman's name, but it did contain a portrait of him as a frontispiece. Emerson described the book as: "...a reproduction of the author." "The contents of the book form a daguerreotype of his inner being." Emerson and Thoreau were also greatly influenced by photography. The medium of photography had a major impact on American autobiography, and became an important resource for many writers, as Brassai showed in his study *Proust sous l'emprise de la photographie*.

Leaves of Grass is a religious book. It links religion and spirituality, visual arts, and photography - and the individual soul with the universal. *Leaves* is Whitman's Emersonian Bible.

Whitman wrote:

"People often think of *Leaves* as wanting in religion, but that is not my view of the book - and I ought to know. I think *Leaves* is the most religious book among books: crammed full of faith. What would *Leaves* be without faith? An empty vessel: faith is the very substance, balance - its one article of assurance."

Nothing, in Whitman's eyes, could supersede *The Bible, The Book of Books*. Louis Stettner created an essential reference book for his own creative work entitled *Wisdom Cries Out in the Streets*. The image sufficing, few know the unspoken phrase that follows: "...and no man regards it." Shakespeare's line is derived from the *Old Testament* book of *Proverbs*. The beginning of wisdom is "fear of the Lord" and "justice, and judgement and equity." Louis didn't hesitate to pass judgement, or to demand justice in the name of equity. In *Proverbs*, Wisdom is a woman. It is only in finding an anchor and completion in the feminine that Stettner heard the voice of wisdom as far as his career was concerned.

Stettner also loved *Leaves of Grass* because it was intended for ordinary people, the working class, not the élite. It was unified and symphonic, and not limited to America. Whitman said it looked to "a time to come," "any age, any time, any land." "The workingman is the average man: if *Leaves of Grass* is not for the average man, then it is for nobody." In Stettner's heart it linked America with the world, and ordinary people everywhere. It also made a bridge between religion and Marxist Humanism.

In Paris, 1950, Louis was determined to assert his place in the photographic world and studying film. Irving was emulating the Bohemian life of *Tropic of Cancer*. We have an idealistic image of Louis Stettner's (and other photographers) Post-War years in Paris, as far removed from the true zeitgeist of the city as the Humanist photographic ethic of the time, peopled by concierges, happy children, women knitting by the Seine, dancing in the streets, and couples in love. The influence of Atget can be seen in both Stettner's mannikin series, and his early shots of empty Paris streets. Stettner once described himself, while taking these photos, as "the living resurrection of Atget." The influence of Atget on other photographers was enormous. Man Ray, Berenice Abbott & Brassai had known him personally. Cartier-Bresson and Daniel Masquet had been influenced by Atget. Other American photographers also took series in Paris that paralleled Atget's work, such as Todd Webb.

Looking back, decades later, Stettner wrote revealingly about his early Paris years:

"Paris itself, contrary to appearances, was almost impossible to photograph in any meaningful way. The great city was far too stylistically perfect: it lacked the cracks and broken edges that permit the unexpected to happen, so original photographs can be made. It was like taking a photograph of a photograph, or more aptly of a picture postcard; also, it had been done so often. I can think of a good photograph taken there because wherever there is life, creative possibilities exist; but since Atget there has never been a great series of the place."

It was also rare that any photographers showed the strong anti-American feeling in Paris during the 1940-50s. Stettner never alludes to it. The only American that comes to mind is Todd Webb, who photographed anti-American posters and graffiti. This trend is part of the story of the film *Rouge Baiser* by Véra Belmont. Ironically, for communist Stettner, it was the communists that were most anti-American. The Humanist element in Stettner's work is best exemplified in *Sous le Ciel de Paris*. It is totally unrepresentative of his life's work. To see Humanist photographers presenting an idealistic world just a few years removed from deportations, death camps, carpet bombing, nuclear extermination, and while the aftermath of collaboration in France was still strongly on people's minds, and collaboration trials still in progress, seemed to some as obscene. Many French collaborators were still living in exile, such as Louis Ferdinand Céline and Coco Chanel, or living quietly under new names in disgrace.

Stettner, like Walt Whitman, thrived in his contradictions. In both cases, things they said can be taken out of context to suggest they believed something or its opposite. At times Stettner accepted he was working in the Humanist photographic tradition. He also wrote a column entitled *A Humanist View*. Elsewhere he strongly opposed the association because he

knew it tied him to the Humanist French movement of the 1940s and 1950s. His individuality was thereby lost. He would also be tied to photographers who had a completely different attitude towards photography, such as Doisneau. The most insulting comment made about Stettner over the years was when someone labelled him “the American Doisneau.” Anyone who knows how their work was created and the ideas behind their craft, or their photographs in detail, knows that this is fallacious and demeaning.

Stettner also knew most people would not understand the greater context of Humanism going back centuries or realize that a significant part of his work was concerned with the natural world, not humans.

“*Humanism*, the term is meaningless... and can be used just to categorize you, so people don’t look further at the work.... The term has a lot of negative influences...so if we say someone is not a Humanist then their work is inhuman. It doesn’t make sense...I don’t know really that it is a complete, valid term to use in art.”³

As Clément Chéroux has pointed out, Humanist photography has been denigrated as everything from “sentimental” to “pétainiste.” Peter Galassi wrote of the “...repetitions and banalities that piled up under the rubric of *photographie humaniste*.”⁴ Humanism was a central theme of French intellectual life in Paris in the late 1940s, as exemplified by Sartre’s need to give his lecture *Existentialisme est un humanisme* in 1946.

³ Picon interview Stettner Archives 2015.

For background see: Clément Chéroux *Un regard à l’échelle humaine : Fantastique social, réalisme poétique et photographie humaniste*. In Quentin Bajac et Clément Chéroux *Photographies : Une histoire de la photographie à travers les collections du Centre Pompidou* (Centre Pompidou & Steidl 2007 pp.171-85).

⁴ Peter Galassi: *Brassaï* Fundacion Mapfre 2018 p. 32.

Louis Stettner’s subway series has obvious resemblances to *Many Are Called* by Walker Evans. *Many Are Called* was only published in 1966, in part because Evans was afraid of being sued by his subjects, who had no idea he had taken their pictures. No one has studied or written about the parallels and dissimilarities between this work and Stettner’s subway series. While the subject is superficially the same, the resulting work is clearly different in purpose and execution. Photographs from Stettner’s *Subway Series* were published as early as 1947, in a magazine called *The New Iconograph*, with an Introduction by Sid Grossman of the Photo League. Walker Evans was very well known in New York when he was taking his subway photographs between 1939-41. Given Stettner’s extensive connections in the New York photographic scene, he probably heard about the series, even if he did not see the prints. Yet, Stettner’s views on photography were diametrically opposed to Evans, famous for his “No Politics” stance, and so Louis always avoided referring to his work. Stettner would not have wanted their names linked. While Evans has been the subject of many studies, a detailed exploration of Stettner’s work is almost non-existent. Writing about him is largely confined to book and catalogue prefaces, and general articles in newspapers or magazines. A detailed study of Stettner’s relationship with other photographers is much needed and long overdue.

Other photographs from Stettner’s early Paris years, such as his *Wall Series*, show the influence of Brassai. In 1952, *Harper’s* declined some of Stettner’s photos because they too closely resembled the work of Brassai. Stettner’s attitude was that if this was true, he was proud of it. In 1948, he had referred to Brassai and Strand as two of the greatest photographers working, together with Cartier-Bresson. The only text Irving Stettner wrote about his brother’s work was an essay on this *Paris Wall Series*.

These similarities, or parallels with other photographers, do not make Stettner a lesser photographer or put him beneath these towering figures of photographic art. Stettner had been studying the works of other

photographers since he was fourteen years old. To understand how they had done what they did he needed to experience it for himself.

“The photographer, by thoroughly absorbing what has already been done, will best be able to make his own original contribution.”

These influences were temporary but gave him the key to unleashing his own vision and developing a mastery of the camera. His attitude resembles the painters from a school of Renaissance art, where each absorbed the techniques of a master, only to eventually create works of a quality indiscernible from the one who first inspired him. Stettner wrote that the great transformative artistic experience of his life was discovering Renaissance art in person, especially the paintings of Giorgione, in 1947. Parallels in this attitude can be found in Cartier Bresson and Willy Ronis.

Cartier Bresson said:

“I spend my time tracing, calculating proportions in small books with reproductions of paintings that I never leave behind.”

Willy Ronis drew attention to the powerful influence of painting on his work in photographs such as his *Noël 1952*, *Fascination*, which echoed Rembrandt.

The influence of other photographers was just a staging post on Louis Stettner’s creative journey, in the same way that Brassai influenced Picasso, Proust influenced Henry Miller, and Max Ernst the collages of Jacques Prévert. Stettner’s finest work situates him as a major figure in photography, but also an important figure in visual and plastic arts, and photographic theory. The failure to reconcile his philosophical contradictions means that he can be seen as incoherent. There is no inherent contradiction between Marxist Humanism and *Leaves of Grass*. It is perversions of the Marxist vision that make Transcendentalism and Marxism appear incompatible. Marx and Whitman were anything but opposites. As Betsy Erkkila has pointed out, in her pioneering work:

“Marx’s vision of communism is, finally, closer to the democratic state of being *in relation* that Whitman embodies in *Leaves of Grass* than to the Soviet Stalinist state that came to define communism during the Cold War years and after.”⁵

Louis Stettner’s life changed radically when he married Janet Iffland, in 1981. She had been totally immersed in a Transcendentalist background. Believing in his genius, and accepting his vision of living in the present, Iffland became his muse, collaborator, and then most dedicated ally in propagating his artistic vision. She published the first major retrospective of his work in 1987, under the title *Early Joys*. They distributed it themselves. Emerson’s *Self Reliance* is a key text for understanding their position and asserting Stettner’s vision. The tension between this philosophy and having to surrender control over one’s work to curators to be exhibited is the great tragedy faced by so many artists. Janet Iffland remains the leading expert on his work. Through her influence, and their interactions with others in France who had a natural respect for artists, such as *Flammarion* and the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, Stettner, who moved to Saint-Ouen in 1990, finally reconciled himself with the world of museums and curators and collectors. He thereby opened the door for his work to come into the public eye regularly and gained stability, after years of struggle. This allowed him the freedom to do work in various media that he wanted to do, without thought of the cost – such as his *Croissants Series*, *Héroes du Métro*, *Sacco & Vanzetti Brickworks*, *Poupées*, *Chile in my Heart*, *Berlin*

⁵ *Leaves of Grass: Sesquicentennial Essays* Edited by Susan Belasco, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price p.57 (Nebraska University Press 2007).

Diary (including the Holocaust Memorial images), *Manhattan Walls*, or his painting on some of his most famous photographic prints, such as *Brooklyn Promenade*, which he knew would have horrified curators.

Part of Louis Stettner's photographic catalogue is now widely seen and much better known, largely due to the insightful and pioneering efforts of Clément Chéroux, yet the context for the understanding of his overall achievement in photography and the visual arts is negligible. The power structures in photography that Stettner criticized in the 1950s remain firmly in place. What is needed on the part of curators is more breadth of vision and humility. To understand and explain an artist, one needs to be able to contextualize, and unravel complexity. Contrary to common practice, a multidisciplinary approach is invaluable for curators. This paradigm is increasingly being explored, such as in pioneering recent studies of the lesser-known creative work of Brassai.

Louis Stettner eventually said that he had been wrong in seeing curators and "the establishment" as a monolithic block. He finally accepted that without compromise to gain the support of curators and museums his work would never be widely known or exhibited in major venues. He would never have lasting success. Power often resides not with the artist, but with the curator. The high-profile exhibitions of Stettner's work in that last decade have all been curated or suggested by Clément Chéroux. As Chéroux has pointed out, Stettner's reputation had long been in flux, but it is Chéroux himself that has played the major role in establishing his importance. Without this commitment, and the tireless work of Janet Iffland, Stettner would have never received his due and may have slipped into neglect, as have several major photographers who were his friends, including Todd Webb and Daniel Masclet. Photographers do not work in a vacuum. Louis Stettner must be contextualized not only by what he photographed, painted, sculpted, created, wrote, and spoke about, but what he did not photograph, omitted, or never addressed in his photographs, writings, and public statements. His work seeks elevation of

the human condition and to give hope, but he averted his eyes from the greatest horrors perpetrated by humanity that certain other photographers explored. There are several lacunae in his career: for example, he had witnessed Hiroshima and fire-bombed Tokyo as a war photographer, but no images are known.

Louis Stettner's iconic works are *Brooklyn Promenade*, *Odd Man In*, and *Walking Family*. His greatest achievement is the *Alpilles Series*, inspired by Epicurus and Lucretius. There is not a person, or Humanism, in sight. It was taken at over ninety years old, with a heavy camera that he could no longer carry, and which he had bought years before and rarely used. In taking his last photograph in the Alpilles Stettner had come full circle from that day on the beach at Coney Island. He found peace and acceptance and was doing what brought him joy. Stettner knew this was the country of Jean Giono's *Song of the World*, with its Whitmanesque title and message. It was the landscape painted by Van Gogh, after which he read Whitman at night; only to incorporate Whitman's poetry into his *Starry Night*. Around the same time Van Gogh was reading Whitman, and recommending *Leaves of Grass* to his circle, he was also reading Shakespeare's *Henry IV* from which Stettner gathered the title for his career reference work *Wisdom Cries Out in the Streets*. This was also a time to think of Marx, when he wrote his doctoral thesis, and explored Epicurus and Lucretius, thus giving birth to Marxist Humanism.

The *Alpilles Series* represents the pinnacle of Louis Stettner's spire, atop his life's work. It is unification. All is one. These photographs symbolize both his divine aspirations, and the power and strength of his religious faith. Stettner thought of Walt Whitman, and like him, could finally say:

"And as to me, I know nothing else but miracles."

In the faces of the men and women he photographed; from the homeless of New York, and the nameless multitudes in movement at Times Square; to the woman smelting ore at a foundry in the Urals; to the starving

Japanese prisoner-of-war that was barely more than a child; to the German woman whose parents had opposed Hitler, Sabine Langenfarb, weeping inconsolably at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin; and among the stars and in the night-sky above him in Provence, and within the forest that enveloped him, Louis Stettner had seen God.

FINIS

Suggested further reading.

Louis Stettner *Wisdom Cries Out in the Streets* (Flammarion 1999).

Louis Stettner *Early Joys* (Janet Iffland, Publisher 1987).

Louis Stettner *Photographie, Peinture, Sculpture* (Editions Casta Diva 2009).

Louis Stettner *Chile en el Corazón* (Edicions LOM 2014).

Louis Stettner *Ici Ailleurs* (with Clément Chéroux & Julie Jones) Editions Xavier Barral 2016).

Louis Stettner *Travelling Light* (with Clément Chéroux) (Cernunnos 2018).

Louis Stettner *Photographe* (Editions Casta Diva 2012).

Louis Stettner *Sophisme* (Editions Ides et Calendes 1999).

Louis Stettner *Penn Station* (Thames and Hudson 2015).

Louis Stettner *Louis Stettner's New York* (Rizzoli 1996).

Louis Stettner *Sur le Tas* (Editions Cercle d'Art 1979).

Louis Stettner *History of the Nude in American Photography* (Whitestone Publications 1966).

Illustrations

Image 1 - Louis and Irving Stettner with parents, Morris and Nettie, ca.1927

Image 2 – Louis Stettner, Self-Portrait, 1937

Image 3 - Louis and Irving Stettner, Paris, 1950

Image 4 – Edouard Boubat: Louis Stettner in Montmartre, 1948 (Courtesy of Bernard Boubat)

Image 5 - Homage to the Railroad, Marché aux Puces Series, 1994

Image 6 - Café Madonna, Marché aux Puces Series, 1994-96

Image 7 - New York, New York, 1992

Image 8 - Battery Park and the Statue of Liberty, Marché aux Puces Series, ca. 1994-96

Image 9 - Interior of Stettner home, 2022

Image 10 - Face, ca. 2006

Image 11 - Untitled, Still Life with Figs. ca. 2008

Image 12 - Hommage à Breughel II, ca. 2009

Image 13 - Hommage à Breughel I, ca. 2009

Image 14 - Madonna of the Steaming Thighs, 1993-96

Image 15 - Louis Stettner in his atelier, Saint-Ouen, 2013

Image 16 - I am a Very Passionate Woman, Marché aux Puces Series, 1992

Image 17 - Child with Protective Monsters, Marché aux Puces 1993

Image 18 - Untitled, Marché aux Puces Series, 1993

Image 19 - Young Girl, Bird, and Man, Marché aux Puces Series 1993

Image 20 - Nature Man, ca.1970

Image 21 - Double Face, ca.1970

Image 22 - Long Neck, ca.1970

Image 23 - Little Big Man ou Le Gaulois, 1994

Image 24 - Wrestler, ca. 1970

Image 25 - Homme aux bras levées, 2003

Image 26 - Le Colosse de Saint-Ouen, 1998

Image 27 - Untitled, ca. 1970

Image 28 - Louis Stettner and Hubert Lacroix, Fonderie Susse Frères, 2005, © Thierry Samuel

Image 29 - Army photograph, “16 April 1945, Carabelle Mts, Northern Luzon, P.I.”

Image 30 - No. 12, Berlin Diary, 2006

Image 31 – Louis Stettner in his sculpture studio, Athens, NY, 2002

Image 32 - Photographing in the Alpilles, with his wife, Janet, ca. 2014

































